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ABSTRACT

Raymond Yeager, director of forensics and professor of speech at Bowling Green State University, has made a major contribution to the field of speech communication. He has been much appreciated as professor, mentor, and friend. Yeager, the personification of the "good man skilled in speaking," is a well-spoken gentleman of principle who analyzed each audience and carefully applied his unequalled persuasive abilities to the audience concerned. He deserves the laurel of thanks for teaching without didacticism, for mentoring without manipulation, for example without bombasticism, and, most of all, for friendship without expectation of return. (KEH)

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PRINCIPLES, PATIENCE, AND PERSUASION: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE ART OF RAYMOND YEAGER

by

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Twenty-one years ago this fall I began my career teaching speech and coaching forensics at Marietta College in Marietta, Ohio. I had come to Ohio fresh from graduate work at the University of Alabama and a baptism of fire in forensics as a graduate assistant in debate under Annabel Haygood. Within a few weeks of my arrival, I had begun taking teams on the circuit throughout Ohio, the Midwest and the East. It was not long before I met Dr. Raymond Yeager, director of forensics and professor of speech at Bowling Green State University. As I recall it now, upon our first meeting he did not mention the doctoral program at BGSU, but it was not long before he did. In the unrestrained exuberance of my youth, I no doubt dismissed the idea of further graduate study. At that time I was on a one year contract replacing a department member who was on sabbatical leave. Since I was not convinced that a career in academia was my calling, I certainly was not contemplating a Ph.D. program. Accordingly, I suspect my reaction to Dr. Yeager's suggestions about graduate school was a polite "no thank you."

If you know Ray Yeager, you know that he is an incredibly patient man. Like a skillful fisherman, he gently floats the bait on top of the stream, time after time, waiting until you are tempted. Thus it was in my case. Always patiently, always in an apparently non-directive manner, he kept mentioning the BGSU Ph.D. program a number of times from 1969 to 1974.

Time and circumstance may alter many things, not the least of which is one's life calling. By 1974 I had passed through a second one year appointment by replacing yet another department member on leave; then I had completed two more years of regular contracts on the tenure track. At the same time I was confronting a degree of anti-

feminist bias on the part of the college administration, which had led to the imposition of a Ph.D. requirement on the young faculty without the doctorate; it was being enforced in my case as a means to eliminate troublesome females or at least bully them into second class citizenship when they failed to obtain the Ph.D. Ignorant fools that they were, the perpetrators of this policy did not realize that Southern women are made of silk and steel.

Ray Yeager's patient comments about graduate study at BGSU had not been forgotten completely. Soon I wrote him asking for more information about his program. After a brief period of temporary academic insanity while I was considering two large western universities for graduate study, I fortunately chose BGSU.

At that point I would come to know Ray Yeager as more than someone whom I saw occasionally on the circuit. Now I came to appreciate him as professor, mentor, and friend. Most importantly, perhaps, I saw in him the personification of the "good man skilled in speaking." Unlike certain modern practitioners of the Aristotelian view, Ray Yeager never used his persuasive abilities save in tandem with his principles as a good man.

In his classes, moreover, his method of instruction was to leave you with the right idea, yet give you the room to learn the beautiful and the true for yourself. Unlike those who may overwhelm you with statistics or a personality filled with sound and fury, Professor Yeager might propose quietly what appeared an obvious question, as he did in our seminar in Roman Rhetoric: "Who were the seven greatest orators of the world?"

Some instructors might have impressed a class by immediately enumerating seven candidates supported by 77 pieces of evidence for each. Not so Ray Yeager; his questions would be left to age toward ripeness in your thoughts; as such a query raised possibilities in your mind, you might take up the bibliography Yeager had distributed in class and begin to read the great works thereby reaching your own conclusions. Yeager wanted you to decide these answers for yourself, based on your own study and reasoning process. In the end you were far better off than if he had constructed a mountain of evidence about his personal choices of candidates. It is much better that each of us was able to choose the seven greatest orators, supported, of course with 77 pieces of evidence.

By the same process, Professor Yeager was grounding us in the great classics of thought. Again one of his non-rhetorical questions: "if you were the last surviving person on an island, what ten books would you choose to take with you and why?" Again, he could have given us an annotated bibliography, which might have been easier for him and for us--but we learned more through his patient persuasion. His method, is, I believe, truly the art of persuasion beautiful and true.

That motto many of you recognize as belonging to PKD, the national forensic honorary so dear to the heart of Ray Yeager. I did not know much about PKD until I arrived in Marietta, where the Ohio Zeta chapter has existed since 1926. Once again I would cross the path of Ray Yeager, as he has long been a devoted member of PKD. Indeed, he plied his patient persuasion in this connection, also, urging me to become ACTIVE in the organization and to consider holding a regional office. As was the case with his initial inquiry about my

interest in graduate study, time and circumstance then dictated against my activity in PKD. Within a relatively short space of time, however, I became more involved in PKD to the degree that I served as regional secretary/treasurer and then Governor. Once more, my career has taken an unintended direction thanks to the gentle persuasive skill of this good man who speaks so well.

As we are gathered in his honor today, I imagine each of us has different memories about the same Ray Yeager. Always a well-spoken gentleman of principle, Professor Yeager analyzed each audience and carefully applied his persuasive abilities to the audience concerned. His uncommon abilities remind me of what was said about an orator of two centuries ago, the unequalled preacher George Whitefield. On one of his missions to the British colonies, Whitefield was scheduled to preach one Sunday at a church in colonial Maryland. A young man of the area was debating whether to attend the service when he asked someone who had heard the great preacher previously if Whitefield was worth going to hear. The answer came back: "Stay, you will hear him by and by, you never heard the like before."

In my experience the same could be said of Raymond Yeager. I had never heard the like before, nor, I might add, have I since. We salute Dr. Yeager today for teaching without didacticism, for mentoring without manipulation, for example without bombasticism, and, most of all, for friendship without expectation of return. Dr. Yeager, you have stood before us as the good man speaking well, always practicing the art of persuasion beautiful and true. For all these we can offer you only the laurel of our thanks.